

The Grim Reaper— 1348



It is summer in England and you work with many other youngsters in a textile mill. Some of your co-workers are eight or nine years old, though you are a bit older. You sew fabric all day in the small town where you live. Your town has narrow, dirty streets and there are rats everywhere. How it frightens you to walk home in the dark and see the large rats scurrying along beside you. Some seem as big as small-sized dogs! If you kick at any rubbish pile, surely a rat will flee.

You run up the stairs to the home you share with your parents. Your father makes shoes, though he is half blind. Your mother is a spinster, the operator of a spinning wheel. You live above the shoe shop.

Tonight your mother is very worried as she puts out bread and thin soup. "The grim reaper is coming," she says. The grim reaper means death. "So many are dying in Italy and France and now here, too. Two families in Buckinghamshire have lost children this week!"

Your mother speaks of the bubonic plague, which is called the Black Death. The disease is ravaging Europe. It is a grim reaper indeed!

Your father dips a slice of bread into the soup and stares at you. You are the only child of your parents. Your two older brothers died as infants. Your parents do not want something to happen to the only child they have left.

"I think it would be best if you went to stay with my brother in Worcestershire," your father says. Your uncle is a parish priest. "It is not so dirty and crowded there in the country. You would be safer from the disease."

"Yes," your mother agrees, "where there are rats and filth, more die."

But you don't want to leave your job here in town.

■ *If you go to Worcestershire, turn to page 153.*

■ *If you remain in town, turn to page 154.*

Find out what your fate is!



You are very sorry to give up your job. It does not pay that well, but it was nice having money of your own. But you do not want to worry your parents, so you do as they say. Also, you fear the Black Death as much as they do. What awful stories you have heard.

In Italy hundreds of thousands died in one region. In some of the smaller villages there are no people left alive to bury the dead!

You travel out to the parish church in Worcestershire, and your uncle welcomes you.

“Is it safer here from the Black Death?” you ask him.

Your uncle shrugs his shoulders. “I was told the whole Rhone River has been blessed. That is so it can serve as a graveyard. The gravediggers cannot keep up with their task. The dead must be hurled into the river,” he says.

“But the Rhone River is in France, not here,” you say.

“Yes. We can hope and pray. But when our time comes, it comes,” says the priest.

Before too long, you hear that a family near the church has been stricken with the Black Death. You watch your uncle hurry off to give the last rites (prayers for the dying).

You fear that your uncle is in greater danger than other people. What if he catches the disease from all the sick people he prays with?

You talk about this to the farmer’s daughter next door. “Ah,” she says, “the priests in France and Italy were among the first to die. Who but a priest would enter a house where people were dying of the Black Death?”

You are now afraid to stay here with your uncle. You must go elsewhere. A cousin lives on a farm about 20 miles away. They would let you stay there if you worked hard. Or you might go to live with your grandparents in Ely. They could use your young hands, for they are growing old.

■ *If you go to your cousin’s farm, turn to page 155.*

■ *If you go to your grandparents, turn to page 156.*



You have heard that priests are getting the Black Death quicker than other people because they are always going among the sick. You are as safe to stay where you are and keep on working.

In the days ahead, two of your co-workers get chills and fever. Then blotches and boils cover their bodies! They are sick only a few days before they die. You are terror-struck. You and all the others who work at the shop flee. You shall never return. But maybe it is already too late.

You and your parents pack all your belongings in a wagon and flee to the countryside. You leave everything. Your father even leaves many of his tools in the shoe shop.

As your wagon rattles along, you see abandoned farms. You shudder to think that an entire family probably died there. Cattle roam in the field with nobody to watch them. Crops are rotting on the vines because nobody is alive to pick them. In one field you see the rotting bodies of thousands of sheep who have died, maybe of the plague, too!

You pass a large monastery. An old monk is outside tending the land.

“Has the Black Death struck here?” your father asks.

The monk nods. “Ten of the monks have died,” he says. You hurry on. Is everyone doomed? Is the world coming to an end?

You reach a small village. There are no people in it. Everyone has run away or died. You keep moving.

“We must travel deep into the forest and live on wild game and berries,” says your father.

“No, no,” your mother says. “Just ahead there is a small village. I lived there as a girl. I know some people there who will help us. We cannot live in the forest like savages.”

■ *If you go to the forest, turn to page 157.*

■ *If you stop in the village, turn to page 158.*



You arrive at your cousin's farm in the country. You are glad to see dirt roads free of rubbish. It looks so much healthier here than it did in town. You are soon at work helping with the farm chores. You collect eggs and churn butter from the milk. You are suddenly full of hope that the Black Death cannot reach you here.

One day you are raking hay in the barn when a large rat races across your shoe. You turn white with fear. "There are rats in the barn," you tell your cousin in a trembling voice.

"Yes. There are rats everywhere," says your cousin. "Just as there are flies everywhere."

"Some say the rats carry the Black Death," you say. "They must be shot."

"Who knows what causes the sickness?" your cousin says. "The doctor in town says it is caused by impure vapors in the air. He says the vapors enter through pores in the skin. That is why the doctor wears protective clothing when he visits the sick."

You work hard on the farm and then, one awful morning, you wake up with a fever. Oh no! You tremble in terror as you pull the covers up around your neck. "I am doomed," you whisper to yourself.

Your cousin is hysterical when you say you have a fever. "You must go! Go at once. Don't breathe on me!" your cousin screams.

As sick as you are, you drag yourself from bed. You gather your few possessions and stagger out. Your cousin burns all your bedding behind you. You are dizzy with fever as you move down the road. You must rest! You sit down against a tree in a meadow. You mumble a prayer. You hope you go to heaven as soon as you die.

Then, suddenly, you feel the warm sun on your face. You have been sleeping a long time. You are afraid to open your eyes. Will you find boils and splotches on your body?

You open your eyes. You have no marks! You feel better. It was only a passing fever after all, not the bubonic plague. You break into song as you hurry down the road. How good it feels to be alive!

■ *Turn to page 159.*



You go to your grandparents' small cottage at the edge of a town. They are not as worried about the Black Death as you are. They have lived through many disasters. "What is destined to be, will be," says your grandmother.

The little town is quite clean compared to the town where you used to live. You help your grandmother weave cloth and help your grandfather in his small vegetable garden. Then, after about a month, your grandfather falls ill! You are terrified. You want to flee, but you cannot leave your grandmother alone.

The doctor comes and gives you the terrible news. It is the Black Death! The doctor does not even want to remain long in the house. All the time he is here he is inhaling spices through his face mask. He hopes this will cleanse the air of the plague germs.

Your grandmother then falls ill, too. You are alone, caring for your grandparents. There is little you can do. When you call the priest, he comes and gives your grandparents the last rites of the Church. They both die within a day of each other.

You are sure you are doomed, too. You bury your grandparents and then return to the sad, empty house. You go about doing your chores, just waiting for the disease to strike you down.

But winter comes and you are still well. You return to your parents' house in town. There is hope that the worst of the Black Death is over. All the mice and rats have been killed. Maybe this will help.

The Black Death returns the next year, but it is not as widespread. You are a much stronger person than you used to be. You are still well, and now you are determined to make something special out of your life.

You remember what your grandmother said: "What is destined to be will be." You think that means that your life was spared for a reason. And now you must fulfill your destiny in life.

■ *Turn to page 159.*



You live in your wagon deep in the forest. Your father shoots wild rabbits for food and you live off that and wild fruits. Your mother is very unhappy. She cannot bear this kind of living.

“We live worse than the serfs,” she groans. “This sort of life is worse than death.”

But your father will not listen to any argument. His fear of the Black Death is a disease in itself. He can think of nothing else. He can speak of nothing else. When he sees a mouse or a rat he kills it and burns the body.

But your father does not worry about the rabbits. He does not know that the disease-bearing fleas live on rabbits, too.

Your father is the first to grow ill. You watch the awful boils cover his body. No doctor can be called. Doctors cannot do anything anyway, and one will not come into the forest. So you and your mother do your best to comfort your father. And when he dies you pray for him and bury him in the woodland.

“We must go to the village now where my family is,” your mother says. But it is too late. You already have a fever. You feel sicker than you have ever felt in your life.

As your fever rises, you remember the happy days of your childhood. You think especially of Christmas, when the house was fragrant with the smell of wild goose. How you loved the plum pudding! You remember the toys you got from your grandparents when you were seven. They were a set of miniature knights and ladies. Your grandfather bought them from a peddler.

How happy you are as the good memories flood in. Why is your mother crying so?

Your mother closes your eyes, and soon you lie beside your father in the woodland. Your mother returns to her village and tells everyone how her husband and only child died of the Black Death.

■ *Turn to page 159.*



You arrive in the village where your mother used to live. You stay with distant relatives. Your father is sure that you will all die here. But your mother and the other ladies are busy making sure the village is kept clean.

“No piles of rubbish anywhere,” says your mother. “Every bit of garbage must be buried at once. Rats live in rubbish and garbage.”

You sweep and burn until everything is very clean and neat. The moment you finish a meal, the leftovers must be dug deeply into the ground.

It is a tiny village with a small church. Everybody goes often to church to pray that the Black Death does not come to this village. When you are not praying, you are sweeping and cleaning.

One day your mother and two other women find a pile of rubbish at a neighbor's back door. “Indolent [lazy] wretch,” screams your mother. “Do you want to raise rats that will be the death of us all?”

The frightened man quickly burns his rubbish and buries the ashes.

Nobody in the small village dies that summer of the Black Death. When winter comes, the deaths from the plague drop all over England.

The Black Death returns to England the next year, but far fewer people die. It seems the terrible scourge has begun to decline.

You and your family go to live in London. You get a job in the thriving textile industry there. After several years you save enough money to get a small shop of your own.

You marry and have six children. You often tell them how it was when you were young and the Black Death swept Europe. Their eyes grow wide when they hear your stories. And everybody ends up saying how good it is that the Grim Reaper has not come back in so awful a way again.

■ *Turn to page 159.*

